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Anjali Sharma

Assistant Professor

Rajiv Gandhi Govt. Engg. College Kangra

Himachal Pradesh, India.

anjalisharmaenglish@gmail.com

Unveiling the struggle: a critical analysis of Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*

Abstract: For ages Dalits have been the targets of exploitation at the hands of so called higher castes. With the spread of education they have now become conscious of their oppression and have started voicing their resistance. Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiography is an attempt at such resistance. Like most of the Dalit writers Limbale has made use of his writings not merely to entertain his readers but to make them aware about the abject conditions of the lives of the members of their community who are exploited without any fault on their part. He has resisted the caste-system as well as the poverty and humiliation which it brings. He has brought a larger stage for the depiction of the social, cultural and political process of marginalization.

Keywords: caste-system, Dalits, humiliation, exploitation, illegitimacy, oppression, resistance etc.

The present book was first published in Marathi under the title *Akkarmashi* in 1984. *Akkarmashi* is a Marathi word which means 'illegitimate child'. Limbale was born out of an illegitimate relationship between his mother and an upper-caste man; all his life he suffered the anguish of being an illegitimate. It was for this reason that he chose *Akkarmashi* as the title for his

life-story. *Akkarmashi* was translated into English as *The Outcaste* in 2003 by Santosh Bhoomkar. *The Outcaste* shows how it is to grow up as a poor outcaste in modern India and to live every bit of poverty and humiliation every second of one's life. As a first person narrative of the struggle against poverty, deprivation, discrimination and violence; it reveals the dehumanising impact of caste-oppression in Hindu-society and traces author's gradual awakening to selfhood and maturity. It is a revelation for all those people who are not on the uncomfortable periphery of the social and economic life in the country. The dominating themes throughout the book are the constant battle of the Dalits with hunger, with the practice of untouchability and with sexual exploitation. Limbale has depicted the bizarre world of poverty and untouchability in India. The intensity of emotion and authenticity of experiences has filled the book with an assertive energy

From his childhood till the time he came to write this book, Limbale lead a life of utter poverty and humiliation. Poverty and hunger were so predominant in his life that he never had any chance to see and think of other aspects of life. As he grew up, he began to understand the world around him and his place in social hierarchy. At times he wanted and even tried to rebel against it, but being a poor helpless untouchable his voice was always suppressed. He was left with no other option but to tolerate all the atrocities mutely. This gave birth to an urge of rebellion and a desire for self assertion in him. After getting educated and financially stable, he decided to share his life-experiences with the masses so that the subjugated and marginalized existence of his community can be brought into the light. *The Outcaste* reflects the plight of a particular oppressed class, the Mahars, the way they lived about half a century back and the kind of poor, deprived and discriminated life the young Limbale lived. A combination of rebellion against social injustice and the dream of a life of dignity for the oppressed masses; this book gives a realistic picture of the

darker side of Indian- society. The present chapter aims at analysing how the writer has made use of the confessional mode of writing to resist the caste-system and to trace the atrocities which made him stand against the system.

The book is full of incidents narrating the unending efforts made by Limbale's family to earn their living. He begins by sharing the first experience of how the teachers forbade them from sitting with the high-caste students when he had gone to a picnic. The teachers even asked the high-caste students to offer the leftover food to the Dalits students. The Dalit children had no special eatables to bring to picnic except the dry bhakhris. While upper caste students had their lavish meals, Limbale and his friends could only hope that they would be generous with their scraps. They were offered leftover food by other students on which they attacked like 'hungry vultures'. Returning home, when Limbale told his mother the whole story, his mother yelled at him for being selfish and not saving any for her. She says "Why didn't you get at least a small portion for me? Leftover food is nectar" (3). That the leftover food is considered as nectar and even the mother of the author craves for it speaks for the poverty in which the Dalits live. In the Dalits' lives food is scarce and anything that they can get to eat other than the stale 'Bhakhri' is a luxury. For generations, the outcastes have lived with the ignominy of eating leftovers but the author describes it as a demeaning and degrading practice of the society. Such a life matches the description of the native's town that Fanon gives. He says that the town belonging to the colonized people "... is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where and how; they die there; it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on the top of each other...the native town is a hungry town starved of bread...a town on its knees..." (*Wretched of the Earth* 30).

The description on the village weddings showcases same poverty. Weddings in the prestigious families of the village excited untouchables. They used to get excited like ‘wolves’. Limbale tells while the non-Dalits enjoyed the feasts, the Dalits standing outside swallowed their saliva. While describing the hunger writer wonders what hunger makes of a man? “A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it makes you eat shit” (8). Whenever Limbale went to any marriage feast to collect the food, he used to get humiliated and even beaten; it used to fill him with self-loathing. Unable to accept the idea that one has to bear subhuman treatment merely to get food as alms, the author one day refused to bring such food. At this his mother scolded him saying “do you want me to feed you with dust-there is nothing else in this house... You have too much of self-respect. From where should I produce food for you?” (9). Their poverty did not allow them to have any self-respect. They could either choose to have the self-respect or could fill up their stomachs. Obviously in a society that discriminates between a man and man, that does not allow the right to dignified living to the poor people, there is no choice left for them but to give in to hunger, which is even more humiliating. One is forced to go against the diktats of his soul and self-respect in face of poverty and hunger. Limbale describes his situation in this way:

Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakhri, and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. (50)

Another pitiable plight of hungry Dalits is revealed in the description of the way Limbale’s grandmother used to pick up grains from cattle dung and dry it to make flour out of it “Santamai

picked up such lumps of dung and on the way home washed the dung in the river water...When Santamai came home she ground the jowar grains into flour” (10). There cannot be more dehumanising impact of poverty where humans had to depend on animal excreta for their survival. Sharing this life story with the masses has served a lot to make people aware of how the Dalits suffer at the hands of poverty.

Limbale discusses the inhuman practice of untouchability in his book and attacks the hypocrisy of high-caste Hindus. He says that Hindus see cow as their mother. They cremate a human mother. But when a cow dies then they need a Mahar to dispose it off. The high caste people considered Dalits inferior to animals, they sympathised with animals but never with the Dalits who indeed needed their sympathy. He tells “Hindus see cow as their mother. A human mother is cremated, but when a cow dies they need a Mahar to dispose it off. The owner weeps when one of her animal dies. The cow-pen looks sad” (14). Mahars used to depend a lot on the dead cattle for their food. Whenever an animal died in the village, it was a matter of feast for them. And when some animal did not die for long, they even had to poison the animal so that they could get to eat it before disposing it off.

The author wants to show here how poverty makes the humans to turn vultures. They had to rely on the flesh of the same animals which were worshipped in their religion. Not only this they were humiliated by the non-Dalits for what they used to eat. Limbale’s teacher once humiliated him by saying “You son of a bitch, come on, start writing! You like eating an ox, don’t you?” (4). They never dared to think whether it was a choice or necessity. As Limbale grew up, he developed an aversion to the dead animals; he started detesting people who ate such flesh. As a protest he used to piss on the skinned animal or throw soil or dung on it in order to stop people from eating it. Limbale describes how poverty makes the poor to turn into thieves. He openly tells

that his sister Nagi was a born thief. He tells that nobody steals out of choice; if poor people will not steal they will not be able to fill up their stomachs. All their lives they strived to appease their hunger. The hunger made them forget all morality. He says “The poor steal for the sake of hunger. If they had enough to eat would they steal? Black-marketers become leaders, whereas those who are driven to steal by hunger are considered criminals” (21).

This is an attack on the prevalent immorality in our political and social life where the poor are branded as criminals while real criminals enjoy all social and economic privileges. He raises these questions and expects them to be answered by those who call themselves civilized and modern. While describing the hunger Limbale has made use of very telling vocabulary, he describes his stomach as ‘graveyard’, he tells that at bus-stand his grandfather used to wait for his customers as a ‘prostitute waits for her customers’ an empty bus for them was like ‘the foetus of a barren woman’. He further says that they kept their hopes alive like ‘a womb cared for an abortion’. It can be noticed here that every phrase that he makes use of relates to death and infertility. By using such phrases the writer bring out the hopelessness of the inhuman situation of Dalits. Every sphere of their life is haunted by death and barrenness. There is no love, no sympathy and no liveliness in their life.

The writer unveils the kind of treatment the Dalit children used to get at schools. Schools are seen as the places where children learn harmonious co-existence; but in this case they used to instill discriminatory practices among the Dalit students. When Limbale was in school, the untouchable boys were made to smear the floor and walls of school every Saturday; while on other days they were not even allowed to sit with other students. They had to sit in the last row near the threshold in the midst of slippers of the whole class. They were made to do those tasks which were meant to be done by peons. With such realistic description of school life Limbale offers a contrast

between the purposes of educational institutions and their real workings. From fetching the water for the teacher, to cleaning the school premises, to doing odd jobs; the Dalit children were made to do everything but study.

Schools often viewed as temples of learning were in reality like the slaughter-houses. Here in this case the emotions and self-respect of the Dalit children were butchered to make them subservient to the upper castes. The root of such treatment of the Dalits goes back to their position in the caste-hierarchy. For ages they have been deprived of education and are made to accept most defiling occupations. In such a scenario dominant castes could not digest the idea of the Dalits being educated and being treated at par with them. The Dalit students, instead of getting education receive only humiliation and exploitation in the name of education. These practices of segregation at schools serve to alienate the Dalit children contributing to their discouragement in moving ahead in life. They fill them with a sense of inferiority and erode their sense of dignity. Such children then gradually learn to internalize caste-distinction and thus contribute to perpetuate the evil practice of untouchability.

The futility of the illogical caste system is brought into light by Limbale when he tells how people used to hide their caste without being caught. The barber of his village always refused to cut his hair, but one relative of Limbale used to have his haircut from the same barber by lying about his caste. Such is the state of the caste-governed Hindu world, where satisfaction of one's simplest needs depends on the readiness to conceal one's caste-identity or to falsify it. Whenever one tries to move out of the fixed pattern of old untouchable existence, he has to learn when and how to engage in the task of hiding his identity. For concealing one's caste is much easier and less humiliating than revealing it. Limbale describes how he was not allowed by non-Dalits to rent a

house in their locality. He was left with no option but to live in an unclean locality. Limbale documents:

However, I went to Latur. I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy. Latur was such a big place with huge buildings, houses and bungalows, but I was turned away wherever I went. They said frankly, ‘we don’t want to rent out our house to Muslims and Mahars’ Should I put this town to the torch? Such a big town-but I could not get a single room. Every town and person was caste-conscious. This casteism has dehumanized everyone. (106)

Limbale was forced by the discriminating circumstances to use false surname ‘Kamble’ in order to get a house on rent. Such actions prove to be beneficial in many ways. On one hand they correspond to the Dalits’ desire to be something else; something different from and higher than what their distinctive surname connotes; on the other hand they help them to escape humiliation. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that such an action often leads to a sense of inferiority and degradation as it demeans the identity of the person. The question of identity-crisis plagues the whole existence of the Dalits and same was true to Limbale. The same question becomes more crucial for an individual who does not fully belong to his own caste. Being from a so-called untouchable caste was a stain on his identity and being an illegitimate contaminated his whole existence. A Marathi Dalit poet says “Don’t ask my name, don’t ask my caste, don’t ask the place where I stay, because you will hate me if I answer all these questions” (Bagwan and Chaitya 25). Limbale was born as a half-caste impoverished child. His mother was a Mahar. She was married to a man from her own community and had two sons from him. Their landlord had an eye on her, so by ill means he got her separated from her husband, who left her taking their two sons with him.

Now Limbale's mother served as Patil's concubine. Limbale was born out of this illegitimate relationship, so he was a condemned and branded illegitimate.

His frustration over his shameful identity is visible from what he says in the introduction to the book "I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape" (IX). He says that his mother was not completely his. Half of her was his and half of her was Patil's whore. He says that her milk which was meant for him went dry as her arms were busy in embracing Patil. He had to face a lot of obstacles due to his split identity. He must show to Mahars that he belonged to them; on the other hand he did not want to be acknowledged as an illegitimate. He wanted to be recognised as son of Patil. One's identity is his sense of being at one with himself and at the same time, a sense of affinity with one's community's its history or mythology. Limbale's identity does not fit in this definition of identity in any way. There was no sense of affinity either with his mother's community or with his father's. He was an outcaste everywhere. He was unable to identify himself with the upper caste people at the same time he was not fully accepted in the Mahar mainstream. He says "But I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body? But a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no identity at all" (59).

Throughout the book Limbale has attacked the privileges that his father and the other men of his father's caste got because of their birth in so-called high caste families. He has depicted the sorry plight of the Dalits including the illegitimate children and their unfortunate mothers. He attacks the society where such illegitimate relations are accepted and even respected but not the children born out of such relationships. The book raises a voice of protest against such society and reveals the pain of all those who suffer at the hand of this cruel caste-system. Limbale's illegitimacy always came his way. He was discarded by upper-caste people as they considered him

a Dalit, his own community never accepted him as he was not a pure Mahar; they humiliated him by calling him *akkarmashi*.

His illegitimacy and untouchability handicapped Limbale in all spheres of his life. This shameful identity never let him live a normal life. He always felt burdened by inferiority. It was a permanent source of hurdles for him. At the time of admission to school he could not tell his father's name. Once in class he was asked about his parents; he felt ashamed to tell the truth. In order to escape humiliation he told that both of his parents were dead. This incident shows that as a child he thought it better to be considered an orphan rather than being considered an illegitimate; as the latter carried loads of suffering which he was unable to bear. The way he thinks of his identity exposes the mental trauma that illegitimate children undergo. Limbale's father and forefathers were Lingayats, his mother was a Mahar. He was brought up by his grandmother and her lover who was a Muslim, so he was a Muslim as well. While thinking about his identity, he concludes thinking "I am like Jarasndh. Half of me belong to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated" (38-39).

The question of his fractured identity kept haunting Limbale throughout his life. At the time of his marriage which was going to be fixed with a girl of his mother's caste that is the Mahar caste. The girl's parents came to know the story of his birth and refused to marry their daughter to him. The girl whom Limbale was going to marry had to be an illegitimate like him. He says "The girl I married needed to be a hybrid like me to ensure a proper match. A bastard must always be matched with another bastard. No one else will marry their daughters to a bastard like me" (98). This incident reveals the pain of humiliation which illegitimate children undergo; they belong nowhere and are discarded by everyone. Even after his marriage he was insulted even by his in-laws. His father-in-law says "My son is the president of Dalit panthers. He is highly respected by

his followers. You say that you are a relative of that Muslim. You are the cause of humiliation for us among our own caste. We have told everyone that you are of pure blood. You must have some self-respect; otherwise don't enter our house.' I felt insulted" (101).

Limbale was so ashamed of identity. His frustration over his identity comes out most violently when he questions:

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? ... which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I, really? (37)

Here the writer protests against the atrocities inflicted by high-caste people who enjoy caste privileges as well as the authority sanctioned by religion. They exploit the Dalits, make their women victims of their lust, and leave no option for them other than surviving on their charity. Limbale tells that the Dalits were never allowed to enter the temples. He hated this discrimination; one of his friends was so agitated by such kind of discrimination that he pissed on the icon of God. This action of his was a gesture of protest against the same religion which refused them to have a respectful place in the society. He says "there is a saying, "children are the flowers of God's abode, but not us. We are the garbage village throws out" (5). This description shows how segregated the Dalit children feel, they do not feel themselves to be a part of humanity; because they were never treated as such.

The caste-based discrimination which Limbale suffered all his life made him reject Hinduism. After his marriage rituals which were performed in a Hindu way he declares that he does not recognize Hindu ceremonies and that he was going to be wedded according to the

Buddhist rituals. He rejects Hinduism which failed in providing him a respectful place in the society. Another move of resistance from Limbale is seen in naming of his son. He named his son '*Anaarya*'. He chose this name as a marker of protest against the descendents of Aryans who brought caste-system into existence and who excluded Indian aboriginals from caste-system. He named his child as an antithesis of the Aryans.

Limbale in the book has raised a voice of protest against the atrocities inflicted upon the Dalit women. Deprived of every comfort and right they were reduced to mere mute beings. Limbale has documented the traumas in their life to show how they suffer economically, socially, physically and sexually at every step of their lives. The book has a lot of women characters and all of them have seriously complicated lives in one way or the other. Be it his mother, grandmother or his sisters, all were the subjects of subjugation at the hands of caste-system as well as patriarchy. Patils of the villages used to keep Dalit women as whores. They were only kept, never married. His mother was the whore of Hanmanta Kamble who kept her till she continued to please him without causing any problem. When she got pregnant; he deserted her leaving his own son to be called a bastard. His mother was deserted by her husband, used as a concubine by the Patil and then deserted by him. Then she was forced into a relationship with another Patil, had many children from him while he continued to live with his own legitimate family. The shamelessness of high castes is revealed by Limbale when he tells that the second Patil who kept his mother wished to share her with Hanmanta, Limbale's father. The children born to such exploited women had to suffer throughout life both inside and outside their community. He says "What sort of life she has been living, mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex" (59). His grandmother's sister was deserted by her husband as she could not conceive; she was also lured by an upper caste man. She even had a son

out of this relationship. Limbale analyses their relationships and concludes that Dalit women did not commit adultery for appeasing their lust but in order to earn bread for their families. He says “They hadn’t sold their bodies to appease their lust...Our villagers have provided us with bread so we owe much to them. They did provide bread but in exchange of satisfied their lust with our women” (64).

The plight of Dalit women was worse than slaves. More wretched landscape unveils itself for women when they are women as well as untouchables. They were victims of domestic violence as well as of sexual exploitation. They were raped; ostracized and even prostituted. Their own men pushed them into lower levels lower than even from where they themselves were. As Spivak says “the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadow” (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 287). High caste people had the authority to rape and molest them but if any Dalit man dared to look lasciviously at any high caste woman it was considered a crime; the results of which was rapes and molestations of Dalit women. They are victimized in order to pay for the crimes committed by their men. They had no choice but to carry the badge of humiliation and contempt throughout life, and were destined to remain mute forever. Limbale writes about one such incident “Whole village went to court against Dalit men who were sentenced to prison for a year. When they returned after serving their term, every man’s wife had had a baby. The Dalit women had been raped when their husbands were in prison. A village always acts atrociously like this against Dalits” (71).

The hunger and vulnerability of Dalit women forced them to be pregnant and mothers of the children of high caste men. The illegitimate children born out of such relationships were pushed into identity-crisis. Their fathers did not acknowledge them and their community did not assimilate them. While describing these relationships writer says that it was a kind of revenge to live with the same men who had uprooted them from their families. Even his sisters after their broken marriages

did not refrain from having affairs with different men. The author shows a sympathetic understanding of the plight of all the female characters and worries about them “She (mother of Limale) will die blemished, an object of someone’s lust, but will anyone marry my sisters? I am a man, so even if nobody marries me I can find relief with a whore, but what about my sisters...they say that every human being is born with his or her match. If so, where are their bridegrooms? Or are they going to be victims like my mother?” (64-65).

The end of the book encapsulates all the questions which haunted the writer and continue to haunt everyone who is like him. He questions whether his mother and grandmother will have their share of respect? Or will the secular society undertake his Dada’s funeral? He says “Why this labyrinth of customs? Who has created such values of right and wrong, and what for? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow?” (113). Limbale knows that these questions will never be answered. The book is in fact about the futility of these questions as well as the frustration of not finding the answers for them.

Resistance in *The Outcaste* appears in the form of a challenge, a refusal to accept and finally the denial to follow the caste system. Limbale does not accept or validate those traditions which were forced on him by the sanction of religion. According to Limbale religion is a tool which divides rather than bringing together. It divides people on the basis of caste which leads to inequality, discrimination, exploitation, subjugation and crushing of self-respect and dignity of people placed at the lowest rung of caste-hierarchy. Limbale seeks to establish his identity by questioning the entire social system. With the use of original dialect, idiom and metaphor, the book asserts narrator’s inner quest to be recognized as a respectful individual. It is an examination of the hypocrisy of caste system and its blind followers who victimize the Dalits for their material comforts. It is essentially a rebellion which opposes the exploitation of weak minority at the hands

of stronger majority. It is a voice of resistance against the lack of compassion which lower-castes have endured for centuries. His assertion of Dalit consciousness is another step towards making society aware of the dark truths that need to be confronted, in order to make an equalitarian tomorrow.

Limbale has passionately woven his life story in order to bring out the suppressed anger of an illegitimate child in the present social setup. He has succeeded in breaking the silence which was enforced on Dalits for centuries. *The Outcaste* has proved to be an eye-opener which has documented the emergence of protagonist as an awakening and revolutionary individual. He has denied the authenticity of the caste-system through his continuous struggle against it. He has dared to go against the evil trends of society. Though the structure of caste system is so deeply rooted in our minds that it may not be possible to overthrow it forever; but Limbale has surely made a radical attempt at breaking the principles of this extremely powerful and excruciating social system. It is an emotionally and philosophically powerful autobiography which makes the reader introspect, hence fulfilling its foremost function.

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